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Writing Sample

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Includes "Trouble in Beijing" and an excerpt from An Embarrassment of Riches.

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Charlston Ong
From
Woman of Am-Kaw and Other Stories
(Anvil: Pasig City, 1992)

Trouble in Beijing

HE HAS PACKED his Chinese version Lutheran Bible this time. Conversion to Protestantism during his old age seemed to be Father's final affront against Mother's Buddhism and the Catholic upbringing of us children. The old termite-ravaged Kuomintang flag could be unfurled in Tiananmen Square at the "crucial moment." And, certainly, the vintage WW II issue .45 calibre pistol may come in handy if things really got ugly. A duffel bag and leather attaché case have been sitting in our living room since early morning. Father's finally gotten his reluctant travel agent to book him on the next flight to Hong Kong where he plans to sneak into the mainland since direct flights to China have been cancelled as political tension heightened. "Wait till things settle a bit, Ah Bien," Mother pleaded. But save for the travel visa he hopes to secure from the Chinese embassy later this afternoon, my Father is again packed and set to "reconquer the mainland."

With the rest of the world, Father had watched curiously the growing student-led popular movement in Beijing which the foreign press had dubbed as being "pro-democracy." Curiosity turned into excitement as the masses of demonstrators occupying Tiananmen Square swelled. He was exhilarated, awaiting every bit of satellite-fed news from China. Hope became trepidation as conservative gained the upper hand in the government power struggle, and as enthusiasm waned and police crackdowns began there was anger in Father's eyes before he wept. He actually wept. Those were the first tears I saw him shed for anyone. Tears he'd certainly deny me should I, his daughter, drop dead here and now.

"He wept mother," I bleated like a goat, then, quite unable to hold back my own tears. "He wouldn't even show up at Roger's funeral and now he weeps for strangers across the Pacific Ocean."

"White hair cannot bury black hair," Mother replied for the umpteenth time, explaining how Chinese parents aren't supposed to send their children to the grave.

Father came to Manila during the '50s to help market his uncle's silk, textile and foodstuff imports from China across the Philippine Islands. By the end of the Second World War Father had made enough of a fortune to return to Amoy and set up a trading post for coconut products from Manila. In fact, he'd begun refurbishing

the ancestral home in preparation for our eventual return when Mao marched his armies into Beijing and short-circuited Father's plans. Not that he loved the Kuomintang any better but Father simply hated the communists more. It was an absurd hatred seemingly beyond ideology and politics, a personal score that has yet to be settled. I remember Mother relating to us kids once how Father was arrested by some overzealous communist youth leaguer when he returned to Amoy in '49 amidst civil war chaos to try and bring **Out** Grandmother. But the old woman was too weak to travel and Father was detained by this band of militant youngsters demanding that he unload his "foreign gold hoard." Father never talked about the incident, although years later I'd guessed that the calluses on his back had to do with those times. Even after travel restrictions to China were lifted back in the '70s, Father wouldn't hear of any of us visiting the place. He wouldn't touch any merchandise from the mainland even as our dry goods competitors were bringing in abalones, mushrooms, preserves and other delicacies in demand in the local Chinese community.

"There are no communist mushrooms, Father." I remember my brother Roger raising his voice once in desperation. We later shifted to textile and garments from Taiwan, although, Lately, mainland merchandise are again gaining on the market. Father's semi-retired, though, since suffering a mild stroke six years ago, my cousins and I mostly run the business.

Father frequents Taiwan and Hong Kong which he calls "free Chinese" territories. He has an uncanny way of timing "business meetings" abroad to coincide with important family matters at home. Two years ago he missed Roger's funeral for a property auction in Hong Kong. Although he might have been holed up in some local five-star hotel for all we know.

Since the student movement began in Beijing a month ago Father's entire existence has revolved around news from China. You didn't try conversing with him unless it concerned the latest developments on the trouble in Beijing. He fired off letters to Chinese-language dailies denouncing the communist leadership in Beijing and supporting the "patriotic youth." He even went around soliciting funds for the movement from kin and associates.

I don't think Father will make it to China, at least not until the political situation normalizes. No one in his right mind will issue him a visa to that country at this hour and I'm sure Mother knows this too. But she chooses to play his game. Mother's great at playing Father's games.

Its not that I don't care about Chinese students being roughed up by their police. For I too am routinely concerned with the plight of workers being tear gassed in South Korea, blacks being lynched in South Africa

and gorillas being hunted down in the Kenyan mist. But for the life of me I cannot fathom this sudden concern for freedom and “human rights” in someone who insists that there are “technically” no political killings in the Philippines.

When I was picked up by the military years ago on the campus where I was associate editor of the school organ, Father did nothing to help me get out of detention although I knew he had a couple of generals on his Christmas mailing list. It was Mother who visited me every day and finally pulled enough strings to set me free. The old man thought detention would teach me some lasting lessons.

“So you think washing latrines is the worst thing they can think of,” I remember yelling at him in exasperation a week after my release just to break that consuming silence that has since come between us. But he was deaf to my anger and has hardly been a presence in my life ever since.

So much has happened since then and Father certainly has had more than his fair share of pain. Still, why am I convinced that he is again running away? Because Father thinks I’m marrying Hilario Brill in less than three weeks and it would be quite convenient for my old man to be fighting for democracy in China just when he is supposed to be giving me away in church.

Father doesn’t seem to like Larry. He doesn’t seem to like anyone since Roger died nearly two years ago from a malignant brain tumor. Father insists that Roger would still be alive if Mother had consented to send him to China for acupuncture and *Chi kung* treatment which is supposed to work wonders. But Roger had gone into coma two weeks after experiencing those crippling headaches and the doctors assured us that nothing could be done for him anywhere—even in Texas where Uncle Soo, Father’s cousin, sits on the board of some expensive hospital.

Roger, four years my junior, was Father’s only son. This preference for male heirs among the Chinese used to bother me, too, and I tried desperately to find common cause with my bereaved parents. But Roger was Father’s progeny and his loss was something I’m not supposed to comprehend. That, I guess, is what Father has been saying to me all this time through his silence and evasions

Larry’s much older than me. But that fact didn’t matter to my parents as much as his being a pure-bred Pampango. Women in our clan have had to marry grandfathers back on the mainland when circumstances warranted. But this would be the first time in eight hundred years that a daughter of the Lims would be marrying a non—Chinese person. A *huanna*

“It’s 1989, Mother,” I’d say as if such dates mattered to people for whom the fate of the universe is inexorably tied to family history; people who are wont to recall, for instance, “the year of the great flood, when our patriarch Lim Bao became Minister of Rites in the Court of Emperor Chiemi Lung...”

I’ve known Larry for over a year since meeting him in an introductory session on Transcendental Meditation and we’ve been dating for six months. He is the editor of a left-leaning weekly journal to which I contribute occasionally. Perhaps things would have been more difficult for us if Roger hadn’t died. Father would still be quite vigilant in protecting the purity and honor of his progeny—on all fronts—and my marrying a non-Chinese person would have constituted a major tragedy. Now, I guess he couldn’t care less if I eloped with a Martian. I think Mother saw this, too, and let go. What really bothers her is the fact that Larry has a sixteen-year-old son by a former lover. But when Mother realized that I’d been sleeping with Larry marriage suddenly loomed as the lesser of evils. Mother’s from an age where its virginity or death for single women no matter if they were raised to be concubines I think she’d have gone bonkers if she knew that Larry wasn’t un first. But what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.

Father thinks Larry is some kind of communist. He was among a group of students who entered China back in 1970 but left a year. I warned Larry against telling Father this and he did avoid discussing the matter when I invited him home for dinner 011cc. But Larry kept on about the Proletarian Cultural Revolution being the “best thing that ever happened to China,” despite my vain attempts to steer the conversation to safer ground. I could sense Father’s discomfort as he munched a bit too loudly’ on his roast beef. But Larry was irrepressible. Father’s a largely self-educated man, spending less than four years of his life in school. The apocalyptic bent of his new-found faith often cuts me in the wrong places, still, I don’t think he could have risen from the depths of depression were it not for the Chinatown evangelical group he joined eight months after Roger’s death. I even think it has vastly improved his English, all that Bible study.

“I have a cousin who used to head the Physics Department in Beijing University,” Father had said to interrupt Larry’s enumeration of Madame Mao’s theatrical achievements. “Oh? That’s wonderful,” Larry, dense as always, had replied, stumbling into Father’s snare.

“I can’t see why anyone would want to eat yogurt,” I’d quipped even as Mother excused herself from the table. “You either have ice cream or you don’t.. Why stuff yourself with tasteless muck,” I’d muttered on. But Larry was deaf to me. “So, have you been in touch?” he’d asked Father.

“Not since they made him shovel manure in Mongolia to learn about revolution from the people,” Father had declared in his this-is-the-Word-of-the-Lord tone and Larry at once turned to me, having understood my sudden concern over yogurt.

“Please, this isn’t necessary,” I’d whispered to no one in particular. Then, Larry muttered his final undoing before Father:

“Well, there were excesses, I must admit.”

“Excesses?” Father’s tremolo could’ve belonged to the Sea Dragon King silencing the waves. The silverware leapt as he pounded the table. Larry couldn’t have been more shocked if the Dragon King had in fact invaded our home.

“Let’s say grace,” I remember saying as Father looked away and Larry stared at his own hands.

I went home with Larry that night. I don’t know why, but it had suddenly seemed the only thing to do. Father had locked himself in his room after the dinner table incident. Mother strained to keep up conversation with us but the confusion and pain in her eyes was too much to bear. I heard myself saying in Chinese: “It’s late, Mother, we’ll have to be on our way.” She looked at me and her eyes seemed to brighten for a moment before she quipped almost distractedly, “Yes...yes, you should be, it’s late.”

“How could I have done this?” I asked Larry in bed. “How could I do this to them?” I said, fighting back tears. We both knew on the way to his place that we wouldn’t be making love that night. I couldn’t even bear to take off my clothes. It was terribly cold and I felt feverish. I hugged myself on the couch and Larry brewed coffee.

“I just killed them both, Larry,” I said.

“Come on, Simone, they know the situation. We’re getting married soon, anyway.”

“They’ve been waiting for someone to kill them off since Roger died and I just did it,” I whispered in the dimness.

“You’ll feel differently after we’re married. We’ll have kids, and they’ll have grandchildren to fuss over.”

I looked at him and saw him smile and the space between us suddenly loomed awesome. “No, Larry, I can

never give them grandchildren.” Larry’s voice was sad and confused. “What?”

“They lost everything with Roger’s death. Can’t you see? That’s the only reason they’re letting this happen. They don’t care. They don’t give a shit what I do anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” Larry said to protect us from silence. “I’m sorry about your dad. It was my fault.”

“No. He meant for it to be that way.”

“Those scars on his cheek,” he said.” How did he get them?”

“I don’t know.”

“Looks like someone cut with him a knife a long time ago. Was he ever tortured...back in China?”

“I don’t know.” I said, my throat parched and my eyes stinging. “He’s never told me much about himself. He’s never really talked to me.” I swallowed hard to fend off nausea. And felt Larry’s breath on my earlobes. “I love you, Simone. No matter what happens from now on.”

I rested my head on his arm and probed his chest for those familiar calluses around the nipples. “How about these, Larry? You’ve never told me about them, either.” I’d known that Larry was picked up by military agents shortly after he returned from China in ‘71 and spent the next four years in detention. I’d heard the worst horror stories about detention during my own brief and relatively uneventful incarceration, and suspected Maoists like Larry were known to have been tortured during the early years of martial law. But Larry has always avoided the subject. This is something he has in common with father. This black hole in both their pasts from which no light escapes and yet sucking in so much of the lives presently about them. I’ve never known Larry as a Maoist. The TM-practicing health buff I met a year ago was anything but a political radical. He still maintains cordial ties with former colleagues on the Left but cleaning up the environment and saving forests are his priorities these days. I think all that gab about the Cultural Revolution was cheap nostalgia or his misguided attempt to impress Father with his knowledge of contemporary Chinese politics.

“What else could they be?” he said in the dark.

“What?”

“Love bites.”

It was the first time Larry made that joke. He'd said that of sundry wounds and scars. Yet, hearing the words still pricks me like memories of some childhood sin. I'm reminded at once how little I know of Larry. Only twice have I met his son Frankie - who lives with his maternal grandmother - and neither occasion took over twenty minutes. I don't know if Larry has told Frankie much about anything. Larry's a sensitive lover but I could tell from the first that he hasn't had many. There's this old story that Larry's good friend Pol likes to tell about the heiress to a sizable fortune who once offered to marry Larry on the eve of her betrothal to one of Manila's most eligible bachelors. “I'm a communist.” Larry was supposed to have said “I'm a marked man in this country. I can offer you no future.” Next day, the woman runs off to Sweden with an Ermita folk singer and eventually ends up marrying a Sweden lawyer — or so the story goes.

I've never asked Larry about the heiress just as he has never inquired about my earlier loves. It's not indifference that has kept us from probing into each other's past but a sense of the fragility of our present relationship that can easily be overwhelmed by a surfeit of history.

“I like your dad,” lie whispered.

“Ya? So do I.”

“You can't really forgive, you know.” lie said, though, I wasn't certain he was still addressing me. “I still have this dream some nights wherein I drag this poor bastard off the street and cut him into tiny bits.”

I'd never heard Larry like this and a chill ran down my back.

“Yet, its not a nightmare, you see, It's a pleasant dream. Quite pleasant. Maybe he's had this dream, too.”

“Maybe you should talk to him again, sometime. Maybe he needs you to talk to him,” I said, feeling sorry for the man beside me yet angry, inexplicably angry, though my voice remained calm. “Maybe he's been waiting for you to talk to him about us.”

We were both silent for a while. Larry had dozed off but all at once it had seemed to me that I've said everything I ever wanted to say to him. Then the phone rang. It was Mother making sure we'd made it home safely. It was the first time she'd called up Larry's place. It was the first time she'd looked for me anywhere in a

long time.

Larry went back to sleep. In the dimness, the scars on his back seemed to glow purplish. For an instant they appeared to be exactly like Father's. The same pockmarks defining similar welts. As if there was this giant branding iron that all torturers in every age and place use on their victims. Some other nights I would have found myself kissing those scars. Softening the calluses with my fingers. But my fever had passed and it was time to leave.

It's nearly sunset and Father's still sitting by the phone waiting for the call from the Chinese Embassy that everyone, including himself, knows will never come. He's been reading his Bible for hours.

"Father," I whisper. "Let's talk, please," I say in Chinese.

He peers at me for an instant and goes back to his Bible and I want to grab the book from him and tear it into shreds. "The Book of Job," he says to no one in particular. "That's the only thing anyone ever has to read. You figure it out, and you'll have all the knowledge you need," he says in Chinese.

"Father, you can't leave," I say. "Father, I'm getting married. You have to give me away," I plead but he's not there. "For Chrissake," I blurt out in English.

"Don't blaspheme," he says, staring at me with those rock-hard eyes. And I see that he is old, truly and terribly old.

"I'm sorry. But why are you doing this?"

He closes his eyes for a while and thinks of something to say. "My life is over. I must now live for the Lord."

"What do you plan to do? Preach the Gospel in Tiananmen Square?" I hear my voice thinning.

"China must convert. China must accept our Lord for the glory of our race," he says, his voice trembling.

I might as well be attending one of those Bible powwows the way Father's been carrying on but the anger is gone from me. "Father please..."

“You don’t need me anymore, Siao Mei,” he says, calling me by my Chinese name, my girlhood name. I don’t recall the last time he called me by that name. I don’t recall the last time he called me anything. “You are a big girl now. You know what’s right for you.”

“You haven’t invited any of your old friends to the wedding,” I say.

“What for?” he says with a blankness in his eyes that cuts me in so many places.

A long time ago, before Roger was born, a fortune-teller told Mother she could never bear children — she didn’t have the lines on her palm.

“But I’m here,” I protested. “I was born.”

“You don’t count,” Mother had said. “Girls don’t show up on palm lines.”

I don’t think I ever forgave Mother that moment. I doubt she ever told Father the story. Still, I say to him, “You should have listened to the old people, Father. You should have given me away as an infant or drowned me in the river. It might have prevented Roger’s early death.

Father hears me at last and he turns to me with a frightened, haunted look that I’ve never seen before. “I know what they say,” I go on, “My karma’s too strong. I can never have a brother. And I wouldn’t have had one if not for Mother’s offerings to the deities.”

Father’s fear has turned into anger. “I will not hear that again, Siao Mei. I will not have any of the Devil’s talk inside my house. The Lord has revealed to me his heart and I abide in him.”

“I’m sorry,” I say just to hear myself. “The Huanna is a good man,” he says. “Older men make better spouses. They are responsible, and caring.”

I’m tempted to let the conversation end there but I know we’ve gone far enough this time. “No. Father,” I say. “I lied. There isn’t going to be any wedding. I’m not marrying Larry.”

“What?”

“I’m not marrying him, Father. There’s really nothing between us.”

He is confused and truly haunted now. “What are you saying?”

“There just isn’t enough between us,” I mutter, swallowing hard. Despite the years of silence between us and the fact that he has never raised a finger against me or Roger, I must muster courage to confront him like this.

“Not enough?” he asks. “You sleep with him,” he says as if uttering a curse.

“It’s not what I mean,” I try to make sense knowing my words are stale and he no longer hears me.

“Why do you young people do this to yourselves? Why do you behave like animals? Why do you treat yourselves like dirt?”

“That’s not how it is,” I scream but the spirit has flown from me and my bones are weary. “That’s not how it is,” I mutter.

Father turns away and waves me off. “Go,” he says. “Just go and live your own life.”

I think of doing just that but remember at once what I really came to say. “I loved Ah Di,” I say, calling out Roger’s Chinese pet name, his boyhood name — Piggy — for the first time in two years. “I bathed him as a boy. I defended him against bullies. I wrote for him his first love letter. He was my baby brother, Father. I would have died in his place if I could, damn it.”

The back of his hand feels like lead. It is the first time he has hit me. I know it would be the last.

We part over white wine and Japanese food. Larry agrees that we should take time off from seeing each other, and his six-month lecture tour at Tokyo University is quite timely. “I feel guilty pigging out while my mainland compatriots are risking their lives for the future of the race,” I sigh over sushi. “It’s enough you’re with them in spirit,” Larry quips and unloads a couple of jokes about Deng Xiao-ping.

It’s easy to make light of events so far removed yet I’m really edgy about the latest developments. Chinese authorities have cut off satellite transmission from Beijing and the news black out could be a prelude to violence. Larry thinks violence is inevitable. “There’s no tradition of political restraint in the culture,” he says. “It’s always

been winners take all. If push comes to shove, it could be bloody.”

I shiver at the thought. I fear for the people in Beijing but I fear more for Father. I don’t dare to imagine how he’d react if they started bashing heads in Tiananmen. He’s quite convinced that the “crucial moment” for China has come. That the conversion of the Chinese people to Christianity is at hand — despite the absence of any sign of Christian persuasion among the demonstrators.

It’s almost midnight, and this guy having dinner with the German woman at the table beside ours is startled as voices emanate from his two-way radio. He’s an old friend of Larry now editing a major daily. The guy says something over his radio and scrambles to his feet. “Sorry,” he tells the women. “I’ve to go back to the office. We have to remat. They’re kicking ass in Beijing.” The woman doesn’t quite catch his drift and I hear Larry asking: “What’s up, Mark?”

“The army has moved in. They’ve begun shooting,” Mark says.

“Oh no,” Larry says and I see his face folding in. Perhaps he wants to cry and I’m thinking maybe I can love this man, after all. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs. “I’m sorry,” and he lays his hand over mine.

“I’ve got to go, Larry, “ I manage to say. “It’s late.”

“Yes it is,” he says. “I really hope your Father will be all right.”

I don’t really know where I’m going. I wouldn’t want to be the one to break the news to Father and in case he knows, which is likelier, I’d hate to be at the firing end of his displaced anger. I cruise down the highway and suddenly feel that there are far too many cars on the road for the hour. I wonder whether it’s the eve of some festival and am suddenly reminded of the nights at EDSA with Roger and his girlfriend, Anna. Linking arms with the multitude, facing down tanks, awaiting the downfall of a regime. I’d never seen Roger so animated. He’d always been this apolitical whiz kid who was convinced that somewhere in all this mess would be found that unformulated mathematical paradigm that would solve every human concern. Yet he was the most reckless among us. Running from one barricade to another. Haranguing the crowd, teaching anyone who would listen how to prepare Molotov cocktails. And when it was finally over, when they confirmed Marcos’ departure, he hugged me and wept like a kid. Like the first time he was in a fight with this kindergarten bully I’d never felt closer to Roger than that night at EDSA.

But that was over three years ago. Three long and unforgiving years. The advent of a new political dispensation has not brought forth peace and prosperity to our home, but death and silence. I couldn't weep for Roger back then. The short season of his sickness and death left me groping for meanings and scapegoats. But now I can sense the tears welling inside me. There is a sourness on my tongue and my lips are dry. I step on the gas and run a red light. Perhaps I'll drive all the way to Beijing. But before long I realize where I'm headed.

It's two in the morning and the guards are quite fidgety as I alight at the cemetery gate. They flash lights and appear genuinely disturbed. "Here's another one," one of them says. "What's going on?"

"Good morning, ma'am," the other one says. "What are you doing here at this hour?"

"I'm visiting my brother's grave. He's on Matahimik Street."

"The cemetery's open only from eight in the morning till six in the evening, ma'am. I'm sorry, but we can't let you in."

"Please," I say. "Just this once, please. It's very important. It's a family matter."

The shorter guard scratches his head. "Are you Chinese, ma'am?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Are you going to do some kind of ritual?"

"Sort of," I quip, sensing their confusion.

"Is the old man a relative?"

"Old man? Yes," I almost shout. "Yes, he's my father."

"He's been inside almost an hour," the taller guard says, looking quite weary.

"It's okay," I assure them. "This won't take too long. We have to do this tonight or else his soul won't ever find peace."

The guards look at each other and open the gates reluctantly. "All right, just this once," the shorter one says. "But don't do anything crazy. Our jobs are at stake."

"Don't worry," I say. "Thanks a lot. You're doing the dead a great favor. You'll be blessed for life."

Approaching Roger's grave, my headlights define the outline of a figure kneeling by my brother's tombstones, Father's never been here before, as far as I know. Chinese parents aren't supposed to light joss sticks or kneel before their children's tombstones. And Father's chosen to stay away altogether, although both his and Mother's tombs have already been built beside Roger's.

I see smoke rising from the urn as I walk towards the tomb. The smell of incense arrests the thin air. I think I see Father looking over his shoulder as I approach. I've left the headlights on and I'm sure he sees me. I squat beside him and listen to him mumbling some ancient warrior's dirge. We're like that for a long while until I say: "You're not supposed to light joss sticks before sunup." But Father's deaf to me again.

Finally, I lean over and kiss him on the temple. "We can all go visit China, once all of this trouble is over," I say. "You, Mother and I." His singing stops and I hear crickets taking up the slack. He is silent for a while and his head drops to his chest. The cold air nips me and I have to get up. I rest my hands on his shoulders. "I'm going ahead, Father," I whisper. "Don't take too long. It's cold."

As I approach the car his voice rends the silence. "I'm sorry, Siao Mei. Forgive me. Please forgive me," he says, not looking at me. I drive away in the dark and turn on the radio and listen to what an excitable Britisher on the short-wave band says, that scores have been killed as tanks crashed human barricades and all hell's broken loose at Tiananmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace. I turn the dial to catch Nat King Cole crooning: "Smile, though your heart is aching..." I park just outside the cemetery gates and turn off the headlights. I shut my mind and listen to Cole and forget for a brief moment the trouble in Beijing. ~

From

An Embarrassment of Riches

(n/p: University of the Philippines Press, 2000)

PART ONE

Chapter One.

Manila, January 1998

SO WHY DID I RETURN to the Victorianas? There were a hundred reasons, yet, apparently, none worth the trouble I'd been through. Someone once said that you don't ever need a reason to go home, only to stay away. That one must have been pathologically homesick or unemployable. I was a bit of both.

I left the island with my older cousin, Lorenzo, when I was barely seventeen and fresh out of high school, for our westerly Pacific neighbor, the Philippines. It was supposed to be the first leg of our journey to the First World. We were intending to vacation with relatives in Manila to pick up some pointers, references, American idioms, before flying straightaway to California—I to med school and Lorenzo to his father's *dim sum* joint in San Francisco. But Lorenzo had sooner picked up gonorrhea in Ermita and an ice pick in his gut from some outraged pimp. He died within three months of our departure from the Victorianas and Father promptly ordered my return to the island.

I was distraught. Visions of trying out for the UCLA Bruins—I was almost six feet, tall for people of my race, and a passable point guard—cheering Magic Johnson live at the Forum, and hobnobbing with Hollywood types were at once smashed to bits like so many frosted ice droppings over my cousin's untempered member. I must admit that at that point I'd hardly looked forward to med school and the prospect of spending the next decade or so dissecting tadpoles with some redneck professor breathing down my thin neck was hardly more desirable than selling canned kerosene to incorrigibly untechnological Victorianos who believed earthbound spirits were trapped inside LPG tanks. It was the NBA or bust for me, though Hollywood might do with a new James Shigeta. But Father was adamant. I was to return home posthaste or never again, and forfeit all claims to his million-peso petroleum products business.

My Uncle Mario, Father's third-degree cousin born and raised in Manila, finally persuaded my old man to let me spend the rest of the year in Manila. He started too about the many respectable medical schools in Manila

which drew students from as far out as Michigan. Before the year was out Father had relented and I ended up taking premed subjects at the University of the Philippines during mornings while selling scrap at my uncle's junk shop in the afternoons—a deal which saved him not a few thousand pesos in hired hands.

That Father agreed at all to Uncle Mario's compromise arrangement may be uncharacteristic but not completely unexpected. True, having a US-trained doctor for an offspring had become something of a badge of honor among many well-off Chinese-Victorians: the moral equivalent of having a scholar-bureaucrat for an ancestor. And Father longed for his only son to salvage what remained of the clan honor after my mother—a native Victoriana—allegedly eloped with our kerosene tanker driver when I was barely four and my elder sister, Jasmine, joined the underground communist movement sometime in her late teens and disappeared from our lives. But above all else, I knew Father wanted me off the island “before it sinks to the bottom of the Pacific under the weight of the overgrown bellies and fat balls of these hopelessly lazy natives or before they are at last starved into action and start tearing away at each other's thick hides.”

Father was hardly a political person. Neither national issues nor those that periodically engulfed the small but fractious Chinese community concerned him and his petroleum trade. But like all displaced survivors, he had an uncanny instinct for anticipating public chaos. A man of few words, he watched, listened while feigning unconcern, divined the stars, and made his move. Above all else, he remembered. Like the blindfolded prisoner facing the death squad who is forever haunted by the stench of gunpowder and the mocking of the wind upon his face moments before the unexpected grant of clemency—an eternity of waiting, the space between two lifetimes—Father knew the scent of disorder; the burned-out, sickish sense of a gathering fury. It is the drifter who has need of history.

The same instinct that had urged my grandfather to trade his last ounce of gold for a bunker for him and his pregnant wife—who would die and be buried at sea—on the last French merchant ship out of Amoy, headed for Sulawesi, shortly before the Red army marched into Fujian; that had prompted my father to sell off his lucrative rubber processing business in Jakarta for a pittance so he could resettle on some obscure Pacific island a week before Suharto came to power in the wake of anticommunist, anti-Chinese riots; had now convinced him to send me away—to the First World, if possible, to be forever free of the unending strife among the underdeveloped—but anywhere beyond the coming madness.

It wasn't so much that Father thought revolution imminent. He believed it was something that would happen in a place like the Victorianas sooner or later—the trick was always staying one step ahead of the big one. That is, collecting our payables, settling accounts and packing up with some to spare—leaving the place a bit better off than when one arrived. But he feared that I might, like Jasmine, somehow become involved in a future conflict. He'd occasionally remark in my presence that the sloganeering of the Victorianas League of Students reminded him of the rhetoric of leftist students in China back in the forties and even of the Indonesian youth during the sixties. Father always made certain to stress his underlying theme—the search for happiness, if it should be

undertaken at all, is always a personal, at most familial, rather than societal concern. People carved out spaces for themselves and their loved ones aboard the refugee raft forever tossing and turning in an alien sea of troubles. You took in as many survivors as possible but one person too many and the thing capsizes. Father's metaphors often left an acrid aftertaste but I guess he'd been in enough refugee rafts to know whereof he speaks. One need not glimpse too long the broken, slightly hooked nose—a result of injury, doubtless, rather than genetics—squash-seed eyes and wounded, sallow cheeks to see the deep disdain—"I've seen and heard it all before, the same words, the same anger. . . the same tyrants riding to power on the tide of youthful blood."

There were moments when watching him ply stoically over his stack of South China Morning Post and Chinese-language journals from Hong Kong and the mainland; trying desperately, it seemed, to give meaning to the welter of events; to find an anchor for the refugee raft of his own life, I fancied myself to have arrived at some insight into his generation's insistence that we continue patronizing the only Chinese-language school on the island, founded by an exiled Kuomintang general thirty years ago. Our elders' frustration with our decreasing fluency in the Chinese language and increasing ignorance of most things Chinese, I surmised, had less to do with fears of our diminishing Chineseness much less any overwhelming sentiment for the mainland or Taiwan than with the possibility that some of us might have deluded ourselves into thinking that we had at last found a home.

In an essay I sent home for the *Partisano Victoriano*, a short-lived, purportedly left-wing journal founded by my grade-school buddy Ignacio Manalo shortly before the fall of the ten-year-old Azurin dictatorship back in '90, I'd written:

...there is perhaps a nagging suspicion among our elders that we may have found another country. A country to live in and die for. . . that offers sustenance but demands commitment and sacrifice. A focus for youthful passions luring us away from more mundane and safer concerns of commerce and clan. A country that again dangles the promise of martyrdom which only ends in betrayals—all that is, that an exile must at least partially abandon when he abandons home. 'Never again' he tells himself and admonishes his children—'this is not our war, or yours, we fought ours many seasons ago so you may live in peace. 'At some point the migrant knows he must choose to live fully as a person without country if only to survive the vicissitudes of uprootedness. He bends with the wind and profits on cynicism. He says 'no' to everything that forced him to leave home and family—war and patriotism. He dreams that his children will be citizens of the world. It is a pipe dream, of course, for one cannot love humanity without sympathizing with a neighbor brutalized by systematic oppression; because nationalism is only the concrete expression of our humanity in a particular historic context. This he knows. He knows in his heart of exile that his children are no longer his compatriots. He knows this dream of unbelonging is the last thing he must surrender with grace to time."

There was a time when I wasn't beyond believing that my impassioned prose had something to do with the sudden flight of many Chinese families, along with their capital, from the island or that my father had chanced upon the essay shortly before reportedly bursting a brain vessel; now I'm willing to concede some embarrassment

whenever reminded of such conceit—youth must after all be allowed its pretensions if not its excesses. Suffice it to say that I am not altogether ungrateful that the paper's circulation never surpassed two hundred copies and that the military burned every copy it was able to track down. Distance often makes nationalists of us all. So that sipping frosted San Miguel beer one rainy night in a trendy Malate bar curiously named Penguin, discussing the relevance of novel writing in a world gone berserk with Filipino poets Ricardo Yuson and Alfred de Ungria, a thousand miles from the nearest Victoriano death squad, I had written my opus over strips of Marlboro wrappers and proceeded to organize the Movement for a Free Victorianas.

Nationalism, I declare now without fear of future challenge, was in fact a major factor in my decision to spend ten years in the Philippines rather than proceed to the US. The dearth of funds was admittedly a practical concern, but in the long run it was the fear that too great a physical distance would quickly erode one's psychic ties to the motherland that kept me moored to the coconut trees, fresh mangoes, crimson sunsets, brown women, cockfights, basketball fanatics, political carousels of this country which reminded me so much of home.

Still, I wonder whether things would have turned out the way they did if I had never left the Victorianas or had I heeded my father and returned home after Lorenzo's death. To spend one's early adulthood in my country is to be mired in a morass of poverty, power shortages, religious fanaticism, political charlatans and inane movies that often erode whatever pride one has in a people that have survived five hundred years of foreign dominance and fifty more of local misrule and self-abuse to emerge as tolerant, peaceable and instinctively democratic as they are. Spending a week even in a country as similar to the Victorianas as the Philippines has caused many an average Victoriano to forswear his country and never to return. Perhaps I too would have done so if I had spent the ten turbulent years preceding the Tenth Republic suffering the excesses and inanities of the Azurin regime rather than savoring the aesthetic, technological and sensual pleasures of Manila, where I pined and poetized for my nation's deliverance.

I am not prone, however, to speculate excessively on foregone possibilities. 'What is certain is that Father had little cause to fear any political involvement on my part when he sent me away at seventeen. Like most adolescents with scarcely any outlet for sexual release, I sublimated nascent hominess in an occasional socially-committed diatribe against the "semicolonial, semifeudal, conspiratorial regime of US running dogs." But hardly ever proselytized beyond the dinner table. 'What convinced him that it was time for me to leave was discovering pamphlets of the Victorianas Liberation Front in my stack of soiled Penthouse magazines—filched from Father's drawers—tucked under the bed. If I'd known that such would be my passport out of the Victorianas I'd have jerked off all over Mao much earlier.

Halfway through my sixth year in the Philippines, Father supposedly died of cerebral aneurysm. His death caused me much sadness yet, strangely enough, certain relief. We hadn't a relative left in the Victorianas and his business partner—a brick-faced Spanish mestizo named Echevaria whom Father saved from the dumps—forthwith

cremated Father's remains and sent them over to me in an urn with a note explaining some new decree banning burial for "foreigners." For all I'd known he might have sold off Father's memorial plan along with the rest of our property which he assumed. Echevaria sent me documents declaring our business bankrupt and liquidating our assets to pay off what I was certain were paper debts. "Out of the depths of his affection and gratitude" for Father, the son of a pig sent me a one-thousand-dollar check to tide me over until I found "new sources of income."

I couldn't contain my rage and wouldn't be dissuaded from taking the next flight back to San Ignacio to avenge my father and reclaim my birthright until I realized that, aside from the thousand-dollar check, I hadn't a hundred pesos to my name. Uncle Mario, calm and composed, explained to me the futility of my considered undertaking. I was a minor—the age of majority being twenty-one in the Victorianas—without any legal standing in my own country. My country. Yes. I was a Victoriano, born and bred in that southwestern Pacific island of twenty million, raised in the ever-loyal and Catholic capitol of San Ignacio, who had sung the national anthem "*Salvación para Los Bravos*" since I was five and was taxed ten centavos for every candy I bought. Yet I was not a citizen of the republic. The Constitution, drawn up after occupying US forces left the island forty-five years ago, allowed for nearly any creature of any race to obtain citizenship except the Chinese. In fact it had become easier for Chinese people holding foreign passports, who had fled to the island to escape tax litigation in their home countries, to obtain Victoriano citizenship through dubious deals with corrupt immigration officials than for us local-born to become legal entities. I realized, too, with not the least pain, that my father had never married my native-born mother—which might have saved me a fortune. The asshole Echevaria had his bases covered and I was certain he had something to do with my father's failure to marry Mother. I was illegitimate. *II bastardo*.

I was now an orphan, disinherited and without a country, completely dependent on the kindness of distant relations who had secured a temporary permit for me to live in Manila as a transient student. The Chinese Embassy promised to look into the possibility of issuing me with a passport now that my Victoriano resident passport had been invalidated by Father's death—another quirk of Victoriano law allowed resident Chinese and their dependents to be issued with blue "resident's" passports which may be invalidated, however, by any number of reasons including the death of the principal resident. The thought, however, of becoming a "subject" of the People's Republic during those days, less than two years after the Tiananmen "incident," did cause me many sleepless nights.

It is with some trepidation that I look back at this point to that moment in time when I felt cut off from my past, from everything that had heretofore defined my person. I felt betrayed, abandoned, left to float my own raft in an alien sea. Yet something in me celebrated the freedom that was at hand. I was suddenly free to map my own future without any care for family or country. It was akin to being reborn—unfettered, guiltless.

Jews of the Orient—that's what we overseas Chinese are supposed to be. People of antiquity who belong nowhere. Forever perorating about our emperors and sages, poets and prophets or building monuments and malls above other peoples' burial grounds. Yet, isn't it the homeless who needs must dwell in the never-never land of

ancestral glory and grandeur or in the imagined future of either borderless communism or the global multinational corporation? This was an insight I'd try to communicate to President JaySy during the short spring of democracy in our country—but I'm getting ahead a bit. Suffice it to say that although the course of action I eventually took may make it seem unlikely to some, I had felt on that fateful day—December 2, 1991—upon being informed of my father's death, that I, Jeffrey Kennedy Tantivo, born in the year of the monkey—July 4, 1968—no longer owed allegiance to any clan or country but to myself alone and to the whole of humankind. It was a religious awakening, Brother Mike Verano would someday tell me in the dimness of my cell, while trying desperately to salvage what remained of my agnostic soul for heaven. But now I was in bureaucratic limbo, unable to get a usable passport for any destination on earth.

Chapter Two

BEFORE I RELATE the tumultuous events that convulsed my country some years after the more celebrated, but far less dramatic People Power revolt in the Philippines hogged headlines around the world, and my involvement in them, let me say a bit about the Victorianas.

Our island has previously been dubbed “little Philippines” by Western people who probably picked up the appellation from the early Chinese settlers—“*siao fei*.” In fact not a few Europeans I met in Manila mistook the Victorianas for Mindoro or some other Philippine island. It is something we Victorianos take in stride and good humor. Geography is destiny and our proximity to a larger and strategically better situated neighbor has made us vulnerable to the varied social and political upheavals in the Philippines. The island has been a place of exile for Filipinos of all stripes—from revolutionaries who were shipped to San Ignacio by Spanish colonial governors back in the 19th century to criminals deemed too dangerous save for the former penal colony of Los Olvidados seventy-five kilometers from the capitol. Many of these “guests” had stayed on to intermarry with the locals, while maintaining ties with their home country. They have sired offspring and influenced to a certain extent Victoriano culture and politics. Not a few ended up among the landed gentry. A Jesuit historian once described the island, half in jest, as a “shadow” Philippines. There is indeed some wisdom to his jest although I might rather describe our land as a caricature of that gentle, if similarly unfortunate country.

The Victorianas was discovered by the West at about the same time as the Philippines and was Christened by 14th-century European cartographers after the *Victoria* —the only ship in Ferdinand Magellan's fleet that completed the first circumnavigation of the world. Recent archaeological sites, however, prove that Chinese traders visited the island as far back as the first century A.D. The first Chinese settlement was supposedly founded by a disgraced general of the Tang court back in the 10th century.

Native Victorianos are traditionally classified as “Malays,” but such ethnic categories have of late been questioned by contemporary anthropologists. Suffice to say that they are generally of medium build—five feet and six inches—possess a complexion halfway between Caucasian and Negroid, have round faces, black hair and eyes midway between Chinese slit and Nordic round. Their pre-Conquest language, Sadagat, belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian family and bears much similarity to Bahasa and to the Tagalog language of many Filipinos. The language survives today in an amalgamated form known as “Victoriano,” which contains elements of Spanish, Portuguese, English and Chinese. Victoriano, English and Spanish are the three official languages of the country even though Spanish has fallen into general disuse. The Chinese, who compose eight percent of the population, speak the Xiamen dialect of southeastern China so that many Chinese terms in trading and cuisine have become part of the lingua franca.

Spain never showed much interest in our island except for the *malatapay*—a variety of coconut whose juices were believed to be aphrodisiac. I’ve never touched the stuff myself. I suspect that claims about the substance’s potency were concocted by 16th-century Chinese traders who found little to sell from the island. The Spanish governor-general in Manila—who had nominal jurisdiction over the Victorianas—often saw the island as little more than a place of exile for rabble-rousing Filipinos or an occasional source of slave labor and conscripts. Victoriano laborers, however, often proved even more indolent than Filipinos when working for slave wages, and twice when Victoriano men were conscripted to put down revolts in the Philippines, more than half the army deserted so that both practices were eventually abandoned.

The colonial government treated the island with benign neglect, and hardly any Spanish official ever set foot on the Victorianas except when obligated to collect revenues on pain of death. Only the Jesuits deemed the Victorianos fit for evangelization and sent friars to the island following their brief expulsion from the Philippines during the 17th century.

Even so, the religious order never attained the kind of temporal power that the Catholic Church held in the Philippines. Thus, while we Victorianos are not less prone to metaphysical speculation than our Christian neighbor, the voices of Cardinals often ring less vigorously in our mind’s ears than the tolling of cash registers. While such a distinction may seem facile to those unaware of our histories, to my mind, it is the basic reason why, despite claims to the contrary, the Philippines and the Victorianas are quite separate nations.

For nearly five hundred years Spain left the natives, Chinese, mestizos and few hundred white colonists to their own devices. Although Victorianos can prove to be as militant and committed to political ideals to the point of death as any other people, they found little to revolt for and nearly no one to revolt against under Spanish rule. The token Spanish garrison on the island could hardly have sustained a ten-minute battle with a serious invader at any time during the colonial period and more often than not surrendered without a fight. While Victoriano Catholics observe a number of religious feasts commemorating the “bloodless invasion” of several foreign navies and pirates due to the intercession of this or that patron saint, there are hardly any celebrated victories. The British

came and went, the Portuguese stayed a few years—long enough to sire clans of Nascimientos and Olaviejas—the Italians built an opera house and pressured the Pope into declaring them the island’s rightful owners. Still, in the end, the financial burden of maintaining a southwestern Pacific outpost that offered nothing more than aphrodisiac coconuts and served as a gateway to nowhere overcame religious and political posturings. The conquerors invariably sailed away without much fanfare and the Spanish flag was raised once more.

I have often contended, to the chagrin of some politically committed friends, that the apparent good sense of our various invaders—their concern for the “bottom line,” as it were—as much as the neglect by Spain and the contained influence of the Catholic monastic orders made for our people’s resilience and level-headedness. We can be as bombastic and strident with our rhetoric as anyone while well aware and truly convinced of our real capacities. “Never drink more *malatapay* than your glass can fill,” is an age-old Victoriano saying. No God, country or freedom ever made us tear up the balance sheet. For as long as we could peddle our wares and live off the land few Victorianos cared less whose flag was flying against our tropical skies or who had been given Papal permit to rule over us. There had always been just enough poverty and general abjectness around to make you sick at heart, but little of the foreign master to convince you that chasing him away would amount to a whole lot. Say it is a weak sense of nationhood. Say even that it is a lack of racial pride. I say it is a way of surviving gracefully. A manner of muddling through our adolescence as a nation whole and relatively unscarred.

What doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger. True, but it can also maim you forever. I believed we had reached the threshold of our maturity as a people rather unmaimed and healthy; that we had saved the best parts of ourselves and our energies for the task of nation building. I was convinced that despite the physical ills, there were few psychic sores that deeply pained our people; that despite the number of laughable regimes that came to power in the wake of independence, a time had arrived for creating a truly progressive social order in our country without blood and bluster. Events have since forced me to temper this expectation, but have not dampened my resolve.

Doubtless, some will contend that I speak from a certain privileged position. That I am looking at things from the perspective of a relatively well-off man who knows not the lower depths of Victoriano society. I can only respond that the Victorianas are different places to different people and that I can only give you my side of it. I do not say that my people, as a whole, never had cause or will to throw off the foreign yoke, only that the weakness of colonial presence may have unwittingly delayed the emergence of collective resolve. Victorianos seethed and ranted but never to boiling point, and Spain merely awaited the chance to sell off the island to the US along with the Philippines and Cuba in a neat package.

I should concede too that what I have deemed level-headedness might, in some ways, be considered an apathy born of a sense of powerlessness. It might also be said that this passivity and, generally, friendly attitude among the natives made it all that much easier for the Chinese to settle and profit from the state of affairs prevailing on the island.

The Americans came at the turn of the century and built some roads—including the George Washington Avenue, which remains the major thoroughfare in San Ignacio—schools, theaters, soda fountains and a post office. But the island was of little strategic value to the US in its bid to open up China for Virginia tobacco and after the first eager waves of engineers, architects and Thomasites, the number of Americans on the island dwindled to less than five hundred shortly before the outbreak of World War II.

In keeping with its famed tradition, the Victorianas Island militia defied the US military governor's order to resist the invading Japanese flotilla and simply surrendered. Fearing a ploy, the Japanese executed the handful of American officials, left behind a battalion of raw recruits and sailed on. World War II was a non-event in the Victorianas.

It took Victorianos almost a month to find out that the war had ended. Nearly half of the stationed Japanese, inducing the commanding officer, deserted and remained on the island, the rest surrendered to Omay Policarpio—the highest-ranking native Victoriano in the colonial government before the war. Policarpio was Special Counsel to the governor, a largely honorific position he retained through the war as “liaison” to the Japanese commander. The Japanese, left mostly to fend for themselves, didn't know much what to make of our island or what to do with it. When they surrendered, it was Policarpio's turn to figure out a way of feeding and keeping peaceable five hundred bored, sex-starved, panicky soldiers who refused to give up anything but Lieutenant Colonel Kajiwara's ceremonial samurai. Our people had to play daily soccer matches, volleyball games and sack races with a defeated enemy taunting us every so often with loaded rifles. When an off-course US submarine came by to pick up the prisoners nearly two months after the war, there were only about a hundred of them left—the rest of the men and arms had mysteriously disappeared only to reemerge months later as members of Policarpio's “Home Defense unit.”

Independence was never officially granted to the island. After the war, the Americans simply forgot about the Victorianas. Upon discovering the war's end, Policarpio immediately sought advice from Washington but to no avail. After firing off about a dozen wires, he gave up. Four months later, he received a cryptic reply: CARRY ON.

Policarpio forthwith called for a gathering at the Plaza de San Ignacio to declare the establishment of the Republic of the Victorianas on November 30, 1945. His announcement was greeted with mostly wry cynicism by hungry Victorianos, deprived of Quaker Oats, boxed cereals and Babe Ruth chocolate bars for the past five years and increasingly impatient for the promised aid from the US still to arrive. Only Andronico Kawa contested Policarpio's designation of himself as interim governor pending the convening of a committee to formulate the constitution.

Finally, Kawa agreed to accept the position of vice governor and both men proceeded to convene the constitutional committee, which consisted of Kawa's son, Andronico Jr., a Harvard-trained lawyer; his nephew, Fr. Lisandro Kawa, a Jesuit agronomist; John Henry Policarpio, Omay's adopted son; and Francis Macloud, an American trader who spent the best years of his life on our island and opted for Victoriano citizenship.

The committee took five months to come up with a draft constitution, which was overwhelmingly ratified by Victorianos who raised their right hands to signify approval of the document as well as desire for food packets being handed out by election officials. Policarpio immediately called for island-wide polls within a month to elect the President, Vice President and fourteen executive council members. Kawa declared his intention to run against Policarpio and started on about how his rival had enriched himself by playing lackey to colonial officials. But when apprised of Policarpio's cache of Japanese rifles and stragglers, he finally agreed to "sacrifice personal ambitions for national unity" and become the interim governor's running mate. The team and their ticket ran unopposed and on January 1, 1946, the Republic of the Victorianas had its first duly elected government.

"Free at last," Policarpio had orated in his Sadagat-accented English, "thank God in Heaven we are free at last," he continued until someone in his staff reminded him that it was the same speech he had delivered for the Independence Day rites. For his part, Kawa paraphrased a former Philippine statesman and screamed at the top of his voice that he preferred a government run like "hell by Victorianos to one run like heaven by foreigners." This stunned the lean crowd and effectively ended the inaugural rites for the first Victoriano President.

Three months after their inaugural, Policarpio and Kawa were at each other's throats and factions of the Victorianas army, which was expanded from Policarpio's home defense unit, supporting either camps battled each other across San Ignacio—World War II had broken out on our island a mite too late.

The fighting lasted four months—our island's first experience of large-scale violence—until Lieutenant Colonel Kajiwarra, who had by then become Kawa's chief security adviser, defeated the pro-Policarpio faction led by Francis Macloud's nephew, Chris, a US army deserter. Kawa assumed the presidency, promoted Kajiwarra to full general—the first in our country's history—and ruled under emergency decree for the next two years until assassinated by a close aide. By then, General Kajiwarra had already been executed for treason.

Needless to say, Kawa's successors would meet with a similar fate. The next two decades would witness a succession of short-lived civilian and military governments until Gen. Artemio Azurin, an illegitimate grandchild of Policarpio, wiped out all his rivals and declared himself President for Life in 1984.

With Azurin, martial law was officially declared for the first time in the Victorianas despite decades of intermittent pitch battles, illegal detentions and house arrests. If anything, he had returned the rule of law. The Chinese were at first silently supportive of a ruler who could restore order and prevent hooligans from burning Chinese homes and businesses. If extralegal means was a feature of Victoriano society, it was at least easier, and safer, to have to deal with one dictator rather than a slew of rival warlords. But Azurin soon started executing suspected Chinese smugglers and drug traffickers in a bid to placate racist elements and consolidate power. The Chinese panicked and Azurin promptly closed down the airport to keep them from fleeing. Two days later, Father joined a delegation of twelve community elders who visited the Presidential palace to meet with our supreme leader and discuss ways for the Chinese to help achieve the "just society." Two million US dollars was reportedly turned over. The arrests ceased and five months later, with the death squads now trained at leftist workers and

students, I was on a DC- 10 bound for Manila.

Azurin was determined to drag the Victorianas into the 20th century. He brought in engineers and architects and borrowed heavily from foreign banks to build power plants, dams and resort hotels. By his fourth year in power—he was by then already the longest-ruling head of state—tens of thousands of tourists were flocking into our tropical resort of an island every month. The GNP was growing at 5 percent annually, per capita income had reached a respectable \$350—an eightfold increase since he assumed power— and a sizable middle class of entrepreneurs and urban professionals had emerged.

The Chinese never had it so good. After the 1984 meeting at the palace, Azurin had realized how effective a partner our community could become for realizing his schemes. He granted the Chinese every privilege short of full-fledged citizenship. We were at least spared from voting in endless rounds of referenda to approve Azurin's decrees. Chinese store owners and restaurateurs became importers of steel products, cement and hardware required for the construction boom. Others exported processed *malatapay* and tuna. My father diversified into tourism, plunking down half a million dollars in a resort hotel owned by an Azurin crony with the hellhound Echevaria as front man.

Progress had by all indications taken root in our island. Tourist brochures distributed in Manila were festooned with grinning, half-naked Victorianos with full dentures frolicking beneath *malatapay* trees admiring sleek skyscrapers in the background. I must admit to an occasional urge to return home whenever glimpsing some white-sand-blue-water poster of the Victorianas on the glass window of some Ermita travel agency. But as most self-exiles usually do, we Victorianos in Manila—there were never more than ten of us who admitted our birthright (or, in my case, official residency)—cared more for reports of atrocities committed by Azurin's "green shirts" against political opponents and the "gem warfare" among his five mistresses which were carried by the Western media than for official press releases.

Drinking beer with an assortment of journalists, poets and sundry jobless groupies who knew me vaguely as a "political exile" provided a slight sense of glamour that would immediately vanish once the truth about my gonorrhea-aborted flight to the US was leaked. It was a secret periodically protected by tearful poetry about my "sad and perpetually ravished infant of a country," which earned me not a few sympathetic sniffles from the gang of teenaged Erica Jongs. In fact I had earned some repute as an expert in surviving political persecution among Penguin habitués who never failed to inform me of Azurin's burgeoning Swiss bank accounts and latest California real-estate acquisitions.

It was shortly before Father's untimely death when I wrote him a terse, heartfelt letter—written, as well, from my favorite corner table at the Penguin—asking him how he could continue doing business and profiting from a country ran by a brutal tyrant who enriched himself from the suffering of underpaid laborers and child prostitutes. Father never replied; he never wrote me anything. But for two months I had to do without the two thousand US dollar money order from San Ignacio that allowed me to drink beer by my favorite corner table and contemplate

my nation's bleak future. I never again tried to mix politics with family.

For ten years Azurin reigned unchallenged. Tourists and World Bank dollars poured into the Victorianas and were siphoned off to Azurin's network of paper companies and bank accounts worldwide. He was always politic enough, however, to leave enough for his cronies in the military and business, and things did look up for some time. But the oil crises and the global debt crunch began to squeeze the pipeline of funds entering the country, and trouble was soon brewing in paradise.

The roof fell on his "thousand-year just society" when a killer shark ripped in half a female German tourist five miles off our blue-water coast. The flood of tourists was reduced to a trickle. The Coast Guard scoured our waters for months to no avail and the economy collapsed. In consternation, Azurin issued a decree banning all sharks from our territorial waters even as he insisted that the woman had committed suicide. For a brief period, he even prohibited the showing of all Hollywood movies on the island, convinced that it was the movie *Jaws* which precipitated the panic over sharks.

Finally, the Coast Guard bought a Taiwanese-made mechanical shark and staged a capture which convinced no one. At last, when it appeared that the more adventurous foreigners were slowly returning, a slew of microorganisms turned most of our seas reddish with toxin. By then, the economic strides of the Azurin years had been wiped out. The resort hotels had turned into insect haunts, we were back to peddling *malatapay* to aging journeymen, beggars littered the streets of San Ignacio and many were asking for the blood of Chinese merchants who were accused of inflating prices.

Things came to a head in early '94. Azurin's generals hinted at a possible *coup d'etat*, in interviews with the foreign media, if the situation worsened. On February 5 Azurin was found naked and dead in the presidential bathtub. It remains uncertain whether he had died by his own hand—traces of semen were discovered in the bath water and his right hand was reportedly still holding on to his penis in rigor mortis—or was the victim of foul play. What was certain was that no one was claiming responsibility for the supreme leader's death or for running the government.

A week after, Azurin's death was announced to the people by his press secretary~ Octavio Luz. Luz also announced the holding of a state funeral, which never occurred. Azurin had ruled by decree and it was uncertain which office or person had the final say in the disposition of the presidential corpse; neither did it appear that public funds had been allocated for such an eventuality~ Since none of his mistresses and children laid claim to his remains, our late supreme leader was taken out to sea by a loyal Coast Guard captain and the, possibly poisoned, corpse was fed to the creature that brought about Azurin's undoing.

The generals all refused to assume power and left it to Cardinal Edmigdio Gan to organize a new government. The cardinal appointed an interim government composed of two generals, two priests, a labor leader, three businessmen and the president of our State University, which forthwith announced the holding of national elections for our country's Tenth Republic since independence.

At this historic point my ties with my country were fully restored. Although occasionally sending articles to the Partisano Victoriano and other non-Establishment journals, I had little contact with the anti-Azurin underground and assumed that they too were oblivious of our movement to “free the Victorianas by every means possible,” including hexing by sympathetic Filipino psychics.

It was, therefore, with some surprise, and suspicion, that I first read Jennifer Suarez Sy’s letter to me dated February 14, 1994; commending me for my unflinching effort in organizing exiles and “keeping the flame of democracy alive in their hearts.” My dear childhood friend intimated to me her desire to run for the presidency of the Tenth Republic and asked my help in her campaign. She expressed confidence that my invaluable experience in political persuasion gained from years of propaganda work in Manila for the cause of Victoriano democracy would immensely contribute to her eventual triumph and to the fulfillment of those ideals that we, enlightened Victorianos of our generation, have long cherished.

I will not deny experiencing that moment of hesitation that often unnerves the best of us when faced with a decision so vital to ourselves and those we deem to serve; when we realize that everything that had gone on before was but meant to prepare us for the forthcoming enterprise. I am not given to overstatement and cringe at the mention of such words as “greatness,” “sacrifice” and “faith” that often bring tears to the most world-weary among us. But I would only be truthful in admitting that while holding Jennifer’s letter in my hand, my eyes had begun to wet, my breath ran short as I sensed ever so keenly that I had received my “appointment with destiny.”

I immediately set down to write her back a letter indicating my acceptance and conveying in detail the surfeit of emotions that had overwhelmed me. But my hands were unsteady and my mind had taken flight. Certain of the impotence of words for the moment, I rushed to the nearest wire service and sent my reply: I SHALL RETURN.
